

Executive Summary

Trust is a precious resource in facilitating interactions among people in any kind of society, including those between the government and its people. It is also a major concern when it comes to good governance. Yet, when looking around the world, challenges to the mutual trust between the government and the public are common. An international survey noted that in 21 out of the 28 countries or areas polled in the survey, people's trust in government was rated under 50%¹.

In Hong Kong, the percentage of people having trust in the SAR Government hovered around 20% over the past few years². Despite the fact there has been a breakthrough in recent months with the percentage reaching more than 30%, the percentage is still under the average, 42%, found in another international survey³. The surveys of the HKFYG in 2015 and 2016 noted that more than 60% of young respondents did not think that they trusted the SAR Government⁴. The trust relationship between the SAR Government and the Hong Kong public is our concern.

In her speech at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Fifth Term Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, said that strengthening people's trust in the SAR Government was a key task for her and her team⁵. Yet, building trust cannot be achieved in a single day; rather, it is a long and continuous process where challenges emerge unceasingly.

At a point where the new government has just started to operate, this research was conducted in an attempt to explore what the SAR Government could do to strengthen trust and confidence among the public. In conducting this research, data were collected for analysis

¹ 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report.

² The Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, various press releases from July 2012 to May 2016.

³ Gallup World Poll.

⁴ The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, Youth I.D.E.A.S., Reports, Sept 2015, and May 2016.

⁵ Chief Executive's speech at Inauguration Ceremony of Fifth Term Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, July 1, 2017.

through an on-site survey of 525 young people, aged 15 to 34, in early November 2017. In October 2017, five parallel discussion groups were conducted with a total of 20 young people. Interviews with five experts or academics were also conducted from October to November.

Main Discussion

- 1. The more stable the government-public relationship is, the more conducive it is to effective governance. There is neither a shortcut to nor a single factor involved in building trust, and trust can easily be ruined. The SAR Government should grasp any chances that could help to foster public trust in it.**

The research noted that close to 80% (79.1%) of the 525 respondents from the on-site survey believed that a lack of mutual trust between the administration and the public was a major obstacle to policy implementation. More than one third (35%) regarded the greatest benefit of mutual trust between the government and its people to be its potential to facilitate policy implementation. Some 16% (15.6%) referred to its potential to strengthen the governance of the government.

Looking around various governments and some international organizations in the world, boosting public trust in the government is one of the major concerns. The most commonly used measures to boost public trust include pursuing good policy performance, encouraging public engagement, and/or maintaining effective communication with the public. This shows that trust is neither achieved in a single day nor the result of one single factor. It is something to be contributed to and incubated by all sectors in society.

Building a trustful government-public relationship is never an easy task. For the past 20 years, the road for the SAR Government in consolidating public trust has been a thorny one. The SAR Government should continuously grasp any constructive chances and opportunities to build a feeling of trust in the government among the public. Meanwhile, Hong Kong society should work together to protect this precious but easily ruined social resource.

2. Effective policy message delivery and policy performance presentation are fundamental in nurturing public trust in government. It is worth thinking about what the SAR Government could do to maintain policy quality on the one hand and enhance the clear delivery of policy information on the other.

Close to 32% and 27% of the respondents, respectively, said that measures which could benefit and meet the needs of people (31.8%) or increase policy transparency (26.5%) would be most helpful in building public trust in the Government. Other possible arrangements included enhancing the delivery of policy information (10.9%).

A people-oriented government should take initiatives and adopt a multi-pronged approach to promote the government-public relationship. One of the primary approaches is through the provision of quality policies to allow people to share and enjoy the advantages of the policies. Nevertheless, in an information explosion era, together with the widespread use of new social media, governments face challenges in delivering precise policy information in ways which the public can easily understand or digest.

With societies worldwide becoming more diverse and more complicated, public expectations of government services are rising. This is also the case in Hong Kong. The SAR Government has to deal with the different demands of different stakeholders during the policy formation and implementation process. This inevitably intensifies the difficulties the SAR Government faces when it comes to maintaining policy quality. Yet, this should not be a hurdle for the SAR Government in fighting for public trust. The administration should think deeply about maintaining policy performance and enhancing policy information delivery to reinforce the foundation of the SAR Government in gaining public trust through its performance in terms of producing quality policies.

3. The SAR Government faces two major challenges in establishing public trust: its inadequacy in (a) grasping public opinion and (b) connecting with districts. The administration should take actions to remedy the situation.

3.1 The current work of the SAR Government to grasp public opinion fails to build trust among the public and also provokes scepticism. Increased transparency in the collection and handling of public opinion would be a solution.

The ability of the SAR Government that the respondents distrusted most was its proficiency in grasping public opinion, with more than 30% (31.4%) of respondents opting for this answer. This was closely followed by its deficiency in communicating with public, at nearly 30% (28.2%). Close to two thirds (63.6%) said that the SAR Government should listen to public opinion if it wants to garner trust from people.

In fact, it has long been the practice of the SAR Government to collect public views on policy, social affairs or other matters through issuing consultation documents. However, there are some shortcomings regarding the consultation exercises of the Government, including that the documents are filed and stored under different departments, the design of the official websites that have information about consultations is far from user-friendly, and, last but not least, the procedure of assessing and handling the collected opinions is not transparent enough. As a result, rational discussions might be discouraged. These shortcomings might also result in creating an impression among Hong Kong citizens that the SAR Government does not respect public opinion.

The interviewed academics pointed out that information about the household visits of principal officials was insufficient, with district residents usually only finding out about them via the media after the visits had taken place.

From the above it seems that the public opinion collection exercises of the SAR Government have failed to garner public trust. The Government should think about how to conduct opinion collection exercises with better transparency and in a systemic manner.

3.2. Maintaining effective district work and an effective relationship with district residents are essential for the Government to cultivate the impression of being a trustworthy government in the community. Yet the administration has encountered mounting competition in this regard. The Government should review the effectiveness of its communication with the districts.

Effective district work and an effective relationship with district residents are essential for the SAR Government to cultivate the impression of being a trustworthy government in the community. Yet the young participants in the parallel discussion groups voiced the fact that they hardly knew anything about the work of the district offices of the government.

The political and social landscape of Hong Kong society is getting more complicated, with more organisations setting up their offices and developing networks in the districts. This might create competition to the Government when it comes to maintaining close ties between the Government and the people at the district level.

There is an adage that says a boat sailing against the current must forge ahead or it will be driven back. The SAR Government should heed this adage and conduct a review of the effectiveness of its existing work in connecting with the districts.

4. People cherish such values as integrity, transparency and participation. The Government needs to integrate these values into the policy-making process.

Close to 32% (31.8%) of the respondents considered integrity the most helpful element that could boost public trust in government. Other possible elements included transparency (18.1%) and public participation (12.8%).

With the development of societies where materials are abundant, people nowadays increasingly take pleasure in such values as integrity, transparency and participation. It is hoped that a policy that touched on

these values during its formulation process would be more likely to gain support from the public even though its effect has yet to be seen or realized.

The SAR Government should take steps to respond to these values, including telling the public about any difficulties experienced or about the progress of integrating these values during the policy-making process.

- 5. Young people have reservations when evaluating the trust-based government-youth relationship. A noticeable gap was observed between what they expected and what they have seen in reality on issues such as education, livelihood, and the constitutional development of the city. Doubts and qualms among youths might result from these reservations. Concrete actions from the Government are needed in order to alleviate worries or anxieties among the new generation.**

More than 70% (70.8%) of the surveyed young people felt that the SAR Government did not trust the youth of Hong Kong. Sixty-three percent (63.4%) of the respondents said that they did not trust the SAR Government; the possible actions or thoughts resulting from this kind of distrust included being sceptical about government policy (37.5%), planning for emigration (31.8%), and participating in protests (21.3%).

The young participants in the parallel discussion groups lamented some issues that adversely affected their trust in the Government, including the constitutional development of the city, during which the Government shut the “dialogue door” with youth leaders; the uneven opportunities arranged by the Government in meeting with different political background youth groups; and the education path set for them which had made them the losers.

Youth participation could bring in new blood for the sustainable development of Hong Kong society. The Government and Hong Kong society should provide more opportunities and chances for youths. The Government should also grasp the opportunity presented by this

atmosphere where young people are taking a relatively positive attitude towards the new administration and take concrete actions to help solve the problems that envelop youths.

6. The tensions between the SAR Government and the Legislative Council have intensified in recent years, obscuring the performance of the two. The two parties should strive for a balance and go about their respective terms of references so as to secure trust from the public.

More than 30% (31.2%) of the respondents believed that the SAR Government should improve its relationship with the Legislative Council in order to secure public trust in the Government.

Both the SAR Government and the Legislative Council have their roles and functions. It is predictable and normal for a certain degree of tension to exist in the relationship between the two bodies. Yet tensions have intensified in recent years. These tensions not only obscure the performance of the two bodies but also obstruct the livelihoods of people.

The SAR Government has a role to play in achieving quality policies in a way that is highly transparent, assimilates public opinion, and balances the interests of all sectors. In addition, it should, on the one hand, take the initiative in showing respect for the different political stances of members in the Legislative Council and, on the other hand, consider the Legislative Council as a policy partner.

The Legislative Council is a place for policy discussion and debate. It is also a place that reflects people's opinions. It should garner public support and trust by establishing a quality parliamentary culture and playing an effective role in monitoring government.

Only the above relationship between the SAR Government and the Legislative Council can maintain the proper roles of the two bodies and enable them to go about their respective terms of reference, paving the way for them to secure the public's trust.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

1. Each bureau holds an annual policy progress presentation.

The research suggests that each bureau should hold an annual policy progress presentation. Such a measure could improve policy performance transparency, provide more channels for the Government to deliver policy messages, and help the public better digest government information, all of which could consolidate the foundation of the SAR Government in terms of gaining public trust through its performance.

With reference to practice overseas, the research also recommends that the Government adopt creative and multiple approaches to delivering its policy message to ensure the accessibility and readability of the information from the public's point of view.

2. Strengthen the communication between the Government and the people at the district level.

The research suggests that the SAR Government should review the effectiveness of current communication with the districts, including encouraging district officials to be more proactive in reaching the public so that community opinions or sentiments can be collected and communicated to the Government more precisely. It is hoped that the relationships or linkages between the Government and the people at the district level can be more direct and closer.

3. Promote social values in the policy-making process.

People cherish such values as integrity, transparency and participation. The research suggests that the Government should make good use of current resources, such as APIs (announcements of public interest), to

help explain what it has done, and how, to uphold such social values as integrity, fairness, justness, public engagement, and transparency in the policy-making process.

With reference to practice overseas, the research also recommends that the Government allocate resources to enable it to continue learning about using advanced social media for more effective policy promotion and as a more appropriate strategy of communication with the public.

4. Establish a platform to put together information from all public consultations and public opinions.

Currently, the Government's consultation documents are filed and stored under different departments, and people find it not easy to locate the right path or location to get their opinions expressed on official websites. This might discourage them from participating in public consultation exercises. It might also reduce public trust in the Government.

With reference to practice overseas, the research suggests that the Government should enhance the information technology element in consultation exercises with the setting up of a one-stop consultation website, which should include the following functions:

- (a) Provide comprehensive and precise information on consultations;**
- (b) Provide direct and diversified channels to collect public opinions, including the use of new media;**
- (c) Provide an interactive platform for discussion;**
- (d) Provide a timetable of household visits conducted by appointed officials.**

5. Take concrete actions to help solve the long-standing problems facing young people.

Young people on the one hand cherish the government-public relationship while on the other hand have reservations when asked about their impression of it. To make matters worse, the long-standing problems facing young people, such as housing, education, and the constitutional development of the city, are still serious.

The research suggests the SAR Government should take concrete actions to address the problems that have engulfed young people for a long time. These actions should include direct dialogue with young people to show that the Government pays attention to youth issues and has trust in the new generation. By taking these actions, it is hoped that the Government could alleviate doubts or distrust about the administration among young people.